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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001811

SIPDIS

STATE FOR DRL/CRA, DRL/PHD, NEA/RA, INR/NESA, NEA/ARP
TEL AVIV FOR DCM LEBARON
RIYADH FOR TUELLER
TUNIS FOR NATALIE BROWN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/07/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: (C) HARDLINE ISLAMISTS LASH OUT AT US -- FEELING
THE HEAT ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

REF: KUWAIT 1558

Classified By: CDA FRANK URBANCIC; REASON 1.4 (B, D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: An Islamist MP issued a lengthy diatribe accusing the US Embassy of interfering in Kuwait's internal affairs; he was clearly reacting to the report detailing our activities in support of human rights, posted on the DoS website. GOK officials including the Foreign Minister quickly denied that the Embassy or the USG was interfering. At almost the same time, the Minister of Justice, a Salafi, publicly complained that our Human Rights Report contains errors. We reached out to his office, stressing our longstanding desire for close cooperation to ensure access to all pertinent information. The Minister reacted positively, chairing a meeting in which members of his Human Rights Committee vented resentment at perceived interference, and stressed that some facts mentioned in the HRR are commandments from God and therefore not human rights issues. What they did not do was refute the accuracy of our description. Even some Kuwaiti Islamists attribute these outbursts to defensiveness brought on by the GOK's fresh push in favor of women's political rights. The accusations of US interference are designed to delegitimize what are in fact home-grown reform efforts. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Much ink has been spilled in the local press this week over a lengthy diatribe published June 4 by MP Jassem al-Kandari, in which he accused the US Embassy of interfering in Kuwait's internal affairs. He was clearly reacting to the report detailing our activities in support of human rights, posted on the Department's website. He made it sound that activities commonly undertaken by embassies around the world were shocking evidence of cultural imperialism. Even before the Embassy could react, the Foreign Minister rose to our defense, denying any interference. The Minister of Social Affairs and Labor did likewise. On June 7, the Foreign Minister told Charge that al-Kandari is very interested in the issue of the 12 Kuwaiti Guantanamo detainees; he suggested that could be impelling the MP to react negatively to USG criticism of other countries' human rights record.

3. (C) A few days earlier, Minister of Justice Ahmed Bager, a Salafi (and incidentally the only elected MP in the Cabinet), publicly complained that the Department's Human Rights Report (HRR) contained errors that unfairly cast Kuwait in a bad light. We seized the opportunity to contact his office and stress our commitment to making our reports as accurate and complete as possible. To that end, we reiterated our longstanding desire for close cooperation with all relevant parts of the GOK and Kuwaiti society, to make sure we have access to all pertinent information. The Minister reacted positively to this initiative, promptly inviting the Charge to a meeting in his office June 5. To our surprise, the Minister was accompanied by his Ministry's entire Human Rights Committee. While characteristically gracious throughout, the Kuwaitis were emotionally spun up. They viewed our HRR as an implicit criticism of their religion and an attempt to pressure them to depart from divine commandments -- notably on personal status matters, e.g. a woman's share of inheritance is half that of a man, and women's testimony counts as half men's.

4. (C) On women's political rights, the Minister admitted that good Muslims can disagree. One of his colleagues asserted that this issue had been debated and rejected democratically by the National Assembly (conveniently ignoring that it is, of course, an all-male institution). Besides, he argued, Kuwaiti women are better off without the vote than other Arab women who do have the vote but are less wealthy and free. Another colleague spoke of different concepts of freedom: what is freedom to Americans is licentiousness to Kuwaitis. The Minister defended restrictions on freedom of expression to preserve social order and prevent violence. He did, however, acknowledge that our primary TIP concern in Kuwait, the exploitation of female domestic servants, is valid; he said he had just received an excellent report on this from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. (COMMENT: We will try to obtain a copy. END COMMENT.)

15. (C) Charge underscored the USG's respect for Islam and for Kuwait, a friend and partner. He explained patiently that our reports are descriptive, not prescriptive, and that we are committed to correcting any errors that we become aware of. Tellingly, the Kuwaitis' specific complaints tended to confirm the accuracy of our report. A follow-up meeting is planned for July, after the Ministry translates into English its voluminous (apparently paragraph-by-paragraph) rebuttal of the HRR.

16. (SBU) On June 6, Minister Bager told the press the US is neither interfering in Kuwait's affairs nor planning to harm the country's reputation. He claimed that the meeting had clarified "some factually incorrect information" in the HRR (though in fact, the items he cited are factually correct as published, e.g. women's inheritance, prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men).

17. (SBU) Even some Kuwaiti Islamists attribute the recent outbursts against the Embassy to defensiveness brought on by the GOK's fresh push to extend political rights to women (reftel). While the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM, with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood) is expressing openness to the idea of women's rights, and religious Shiites openly support such rights, Salafis and most independent Sunni Islamists are adamantly opposed on religious grounds; traditional tribalists are opposed on cultural grounds.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: To Kuwaitis who oppose the kinds of reform we favor, it seems self-evident that the US is the driving force behind those reform efforts. Even if they could be persuaded otherwise, the accusation would still serve their purpose: the best way to delegitimize a home-grown initiative is to label it an imposition by the alien superpower. The latest flurry of Islamist protests comes at a time when liberal contacts increasingly tell us the Islamists have passed their peak. Other contacts disagree; even if it proves true, Kuwait remains a society of conservative -- not fanatic, but conservative -- Islamic values, and it is only human for at least some Kuwaitis to resent being rated by foreigners, some of whose criticisms seem to them to reflect disrespect for their religion.

URBANCIC